

Web Enabling COBOL

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Introduction

Business processes are the tasks or series of tasks used to run your business. The performance of a business can be associated with how well the business and its processes match the needs of the customer. A business that can effectively deliver the "best" solution in a cost-effective way has the better opportunity to succeed.

The concept of providing business application solutions that deliver a unique or better service can single the business out of the crowd. Marketplace dynamics are such that if the business does not keep pace with changes, the business may be vulnerable to losing its market position.

Leveraging the unique characteristics of the core business may provide new value to the customer and may be able to bring new revenues or keep an existing revenue stream. To bring forward or to package an existing business can offer both savings and new potential revenues.

Taking Action

Moving forward or falling behind --News around us is full of stories about how the "**net business**" is changing the way we think of the traditional "**brick and mortar business**". The brick and mortar business may be in a unique position to fashion niche by reviewing existing business applications and consider how providing access to these applications could bring new customers and keep existing customers.

Some may consider that the best way to take advantage of a new opportunity is to create a new independent solution. Leaving the legacy behind might be attractive at first, but the value in what a business has to offer may be embedded in the legacy solutions. We hear stories of the new solution being naïve, without connection to the business data, but an effective solution may be only found is a solution that combines the old with the new "**bringing legacy forward**".

It's our Business

COBOL has been given a bum rap as being old and out of date. It is true that COBOL has been running our world's businesses for almost 40 years, but that may be its strength and not its weakness. COBOL was created to accomplish the uninteresting, but very important task of bringing life to the business processes. COBOL was designed to be verbose and code to be self-documenting. Data is defined within the COBOL program and the program can be moved among a wide variety of operating platforms.

The rap is not that COBOL doesn't do its job; it is that graphical applications are now in vogue and, if the "net business" model is to be exploited, something extra ordinary must be done. Web-enabling or graphical-enabling COBOL business processes are now the challenge for COBOL.

What's the Alternative?

In the early 1990s, some thought that a platform specific Visual Basic alternative might be the alternative. As the web became popular, HTML and CGI were considered as alternatives, and many vendors now offer these scripting technologies in conjunction with COBOL. There are a number of COBOL alternatives that also offer CGI scripting as part of their offering. The concern with CGI is that it is something else that needs to be learned.

The popularity of Java offers another alternative and building graphical extensions in Java would offer the user a platform independent user interface. Market ready Java Beans provide encapsulated functions which can be dropped into existing applications and add new net-ready functions. Again this is another technology that requires learning, but it offers a platform independent way of adding extensions to the business application.

Whatever the alternative, it should allow **client-side**, **server-side** and a **combination of both** to be developed and deployed. If an alternative existed that allows COBOL programmers to develop applications that would work within a Java framework and perhaps even allow CGI scripts to be created, this might be the solution.

The Solution

The phrase to **"do not be fooled by imitations"** is very valid at this point. Vendors advertise web-enabling technology, but a quick look underneath may uncover CGI scripts or connections to Visual Basic. The solution should be **COBOL syntax** to deploy server-side applications or client-side applications. The web-enabler should work equally well inside a browser or as an independent standalone application. If the solution advertises Java plug-ins it should be Java including the ability to add Java Beans to the application or applet.

PERCobol is a fully functional COBOL compiler to be used in the Java execution environment. PERCobol will generate server-side and client-side applications either using a browser or independent of the Internet. COBOL applications can be enhanced with Java Beans to add additional program functionality. COBOL applications can be encapsulated as Java Beans and business logic can be reused to exploit business resources beyond the confines of the current environment.

Web Syntax

COBOL is used as the web-enabling syntax. Applets and Servlets are supported along with the ability to embed HTML for dynamic application generation. COBOL **web-enabling is straight forward** and consistent with the new ANSI standard definition. Many of the popular extensions from various vendors are also supported making the migration into a new web-enabling paradigm possible.

There is no requirement to learn Java or CGI to make use of the capabilities once thought only available in these technologies.